

Satiric Stab at U.S.

Leaders



ROBERT: Shut up, Teddy! Can't you see we're busy?

A Berkeley Veteran's Best-Seller Casts Lyndon Johnson and Kennedys in Principal Roles of 'Macbeth'

By Leroy F. Aarons

Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK—A biting 56-page parody of "Macbeth" which puts Lyndon Johnson in the role of assassin and Robert F. Kennedy as unscrupulous avenger has become a best-seller here.

The tract, entitled "Macbird," is the work of 25-year-old Barbara Garson, a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley and a leader of the Free Speech Movement during the student riots there last year.

Published in pamphlet form by Mrs. Garson and her husband Marvin, "Macbird's" first printing of 20,000 copies is selling out in bookstores and by mail order as fast as they can be delivered. One chain of paperback stores—Bookmasters—reports 5000 copies sold in the last month, many of them in lots of ten and 15 to individuals who want to give them to their friends. "It is our biggest paperback title right now," said Sy Rubin, president of Bookmasters' five stores.

A second printing of 20,000 is planned in December, with distribution around the country, including Washington. An off-Broadway production of the play has won \$30,000 in backing and is casting now for an opening around the end of the year.

National interest in "Macbird" is expected to quicken with publication of excerpts in the December edition of Ramparts magazine and a long review by Dwight MacDonald in the New York Review of Books.

The run on "Macbird" which began as a joke, evolved into an underground pamphlet and now seems headed for national notoriety, is based largely on its arch and outrageous

proposition that the so-called Kennedy-Johnson rivalry has parallels in Shakespeare's classic tragedy about the lust for power. Mrs. Garson exploits these possibilities with clever irony, casting Lyndon Johnson in the Macbeth role, John F. Kennedy as the Duncan figure and Robert Kennedy as a combination Malcolm-Macduff.

Mrs. Garson uses a gift for rapier-like caricature to demolish most of America's political leadership. Mr. Johnson is painted as a crude bumpkin, Robert Kennedy as a duplicitous conniver, Ted Kennedy as a simpleton. Even Earl Warren, Wayne Morse, Robert McNamara and the late Adlai Stevenson come in for their lumps.

But the play's most explosive passage comes in the first act, where, in keeping with the original plot, Macbird (Johnson-Macbeth) arranges for the assassination of Ken O'Dunc (John Kennedy-Duncan). This implication already has created difficulties for the Garsons.

At least one off-Broadway theater refused to house the play, partly because of the assassination section. Ramparts magazine, a left-oriented journal which this month published an article raising questions as to the true assassin of the late President, at first turned down "Macbird." Later it reversed itself. Another national publication wanted to carry the full text of the play but insisted that the assassin be changed. The Garsons refused.

Mrs. Garson, a petite brunet who usually wears dungarees and now lives in Brooklyn with her husband, is unsurprised but a little impatient with

the attention being paid to this aspect of her play. It was included, she said, only to keep the parody as faithful as possible to the original.

Her basic aim in "Macbird," she added, was to expose the hypocrisy of the Nation's political leaders, not to imply involvement of President Johnson in the Kennedy tragedy.

"Most commentators irk me by only taking up the criticism of Johnson," she said, "while they fail to notice that the main villain—Bobby Kennedy—takes up the second half of the play."

The Robert Kennedy character in the play conspires to destroy Macbird and seize power, himself. After Macbird's death (from a heart attack as Robert is about to plunge in the sword), the Robert Kennedy character makes this closing address to the populace:

*"A tragic twist of fateful sorrow,
friends,
Makes me your President this fearful
day.
And though I never sought it, history
Assigned to me her most demanding
task . . .
So choked with grief, I pledge my
solemn word
To lift aloft the banner of Macbird."*

"What I'm doing is reminding radicals that they have to build some kind of independent force; that they can't get improvements by hopping on the Bobby bandwagon," Mrs. Garson said. "Bobby really has no interest in peace except as talking about it enhances his political fortunes. On Johnson, it doesn't worry me if people think he killed Kennedy. I really think I've got Johnson right even if he didn't do it."

Goodnatured Toughness

THIS KIND of tough talk from a tiny package, 4 feet 11 by 105 pounds, has the unreal aura of a Jimmy Cagney movie except that it's delivered in casual goodnaturedness over a cup of coffee in a three-room flat in a Brooklyn tenement.

Barbara Garson is a Brooklyn product, a graduate of Junior High School 234 (where she met her future husband) and James Madison High School. She became what she is today—a "libertarian socialist"—in 1960 after spending her honeymoon in Cuba, where "everything wasn't perfect, but it was quite exciting. We got back and were so overwhelmed by the fantastic distortions in the papers that we started working with groups trying to propagandize for Cuba."

From there, it was a short jump to Berkeley (for a history degree) and involvement in the Free Speech Movement, where she helped found and

publish the Free Speech Newsletter and put on political puppet shows in front of Sproul Hall. She was one of the 800 arrested during the student rioting.

She also joined the Students for a Democratic Society and became a militant against the Vietnam war. Resulting activities—like circulating antiwar

leaflets on military bases—have landed her and her husband in jail from time to time.

It was while haranguing an audience of Berkeleyites in August, 1965, about a projected peace march on Washington that Mrs. Garson made a slip of the tongue, calling Mrs. Johnson "Lady Macbird."

Afterward, she was struck by the way present-day political realities fit the pattern of the Shakespeare tragedy. She was especially excited by what she considered to be the similarity of the moral issues: guilt and retribution, lust for power, the disparity between what is said and what is thought.

At first, she planned to write an entertainment for the International Day of Protest Oct. 15, 1965. But the day came and went and the play kept expanding itself.

"Every day I woke up and read in the paper something that made it truer and truer." After four months of work, "Macbird" was ready.

A Fashionable Theme

THE GARSONS printed 5000 copies of an "underground" edition, circulated it at Berkeley and sold it out in a few weeks. Encouraged by the response both at Berkeley and from friends in New York, they tried to find a paperback publisher who would sponsor general distribution, but the publishers either demanded unreasonable options or wouldn't touch it at all.

So the Garsons moved to New York, set up their own firm—Grassy Knoll Press—and put out 5000 additional copies of "Macbird" in October, contracting with a local distributor to circulate them in New York bookstores. They went like hotcakes. When another printing of 10,000 came out two weeks ago, stores put up signs saying, "Macbird is back." These copies, too, are now almost gone.

"Macbird's" phenomenal success is due partly to the current fashion for anti-Administration tracts (a second play, "Viet Rock," is running off-Broadway and a third is in the works) and partly to favorable articles by Robert Brustein, an eminent theater critic and dean of the Yale Drama School, in the New York Times Magazine and Jack

Newfield in the Village Voice. But "Macbird" stands on its own as an ingenious marriage of Elizabethan stylisms and topical satire.

The play opens at the Democratic National Convention with Ken O'Dunc and Robert debating whether to offer the Vice Presidency to Macbird.

"But, Jack, you know it isn't merely scruples," protests Robert. "He has a fat, yet hungry look. Such men are dangerous."

The action moves through Macbird's confrontation with the three witches (a beatnik demonstrator, a Black Muslim and an Old Leftist), the shooting of Ken O'Dunc (while riding in a parade arranged by Macbird and Lady Macbird) and the coronation of his successor.

"Our highest goal is peace," Macbird says in his inaugural . . .

"But in its quest

*We shall not fear to use our righteous
might.*

*In short, we seek that pox Americana
That all the freedom-loving world
desires.*

*The unity of all alone contents us.
We plan to guide this planet by
consensus."*

But Macbird's troubles begin to multiply: a revolution in Viet Land, the growing Bobby conspiracy from his exile in New York and the increasing distractedness of Lady Macbird:

"Flower by the roadside . . .

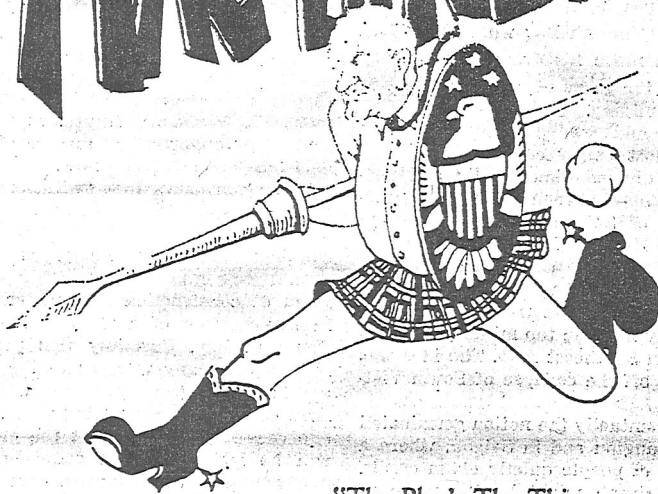
*Plant these flowers . . .
Let all the land be lined with living
blooms.*

*Yet all the petals of a summer's roses
Can never sweeten this accursed land."*

Macbird, reassured by the witches, is convinced that "no man with beating heart or human blood" can harm him. But as Robert closes in, he informs Macbird that his father, to "temper us for roles of world authority," replaced his sons' hearts with steel and plastic tubing and their blood with "a tepid antiseptic brine."

*"And so, Macbird, that very man you fear,
Your heartless, bloodless foe now lifts
his spear."*

MACBIRD!



"The Play's The Thing"

Wherein I'll Catch The Conscience of the King"

BARBARA GARSON

The cover of "Macbird" by Lisa Lyons, who also did the illustration at left below and others in the booklet.

But too late, Macbird, crying, "Thus cracks a noble heart!", expires.

Barbara Garson is aiming her spear at new targets. Living off a \$5000 grant from the Yale Drama School (a direct consequence of "Macbird"), she is writing a second play based on the Book of Job. In it, Job is a liberal Democrat, God is the Democratic Party and the Devil is the GOP.

But a play itself can't change things, she admits. "It's interesting for me. But the hard work of organizing people into a movement that can use its numbers to affect politics is what has to be done.

"The wealth of this country has to be used for positive good, for liberating people all over the world from poverty and dreary work. It's not just choosing between who is going to be in power, but positively shaping something worth while."

You leave her at the door of the Brooklyn flat, intense, committed, still talking. You go down the stairs, and in the dim ancient hallway, her words still echoing, you forget for a minute and it's almost like the 1930s again.

Then you're out on Flatbush Avenue with the television aerials and a new Thunderbird speeding by, and its 1966. The year of "Macbird."